



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

One of the goals of the Historical Society has been to gather the remembrances people have of Sharpsville in decades past. So we were quite pleased to come across a recently created blog that does just that—"Small Town Memories" created by Sharpsville native Ann Angel-Eberhardt.

While Ann now lives in Arizona, if the maiden name sounds familiar it is because her father August Angel was well-known as the owner of Angel's Casino, a councilman, and the publisher of the revived *Sharpsville Advertiser*.

Her blog has entries under several categories written by herself as well as other contributors. Some examples include Angel's Casino, the Ritz Theater, Buhl Park, North Walnut Street, the Robison School, the Shenango River, and various shorter reminiscences. It may be found at <https://bissella9.wordpress.com/> There is also a link to it on the Historical Society's website.

We urge you to check it out and submit your own memories. Of course, if you have a story or recollection you want to share with us at the Historical Society, we are eager to listen.

Upcoming Events

Presentation by Roland Barksdale-Hall on the African-American experience in the Shenango Valley at our February meeting
7:30pm February 2nd Historical Society Headquarters
The public is encouraged to attend!



GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS
Pittsburgh Rivers Casino January 21st
Cleveland Horseshoe Casino February 25th
Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



Bus trip to see **PHANTOM OF THE OPERA**
February 28th Benedum Center, Pittsburgh
Cost \$120/person
Call 724-962-2392 for ticket availability



Area Community Theatre of Sharpsville (ACTS) production of
the beloved Christmas classic

Amahl & the Night Visitors
January 16th and 18th
Pierce Opera House

Traces of Lost Sharpsville

The Oldest Building in Town

We are often asked "What is the oldest building in Sharpsville?" With reasonable certainty we can say it is the old schoolhouse which stands at the corner of Mercer Avenue and High Street. (James Sharp's house was even older, but it was torn down in the early 1980s.)

The structure was built in 1847 by the firm of Vincent, Himrod & McClure who, the year before, built the first blast furnace here, the "Blanche." As no system of public education had reached the area at that time, it was built to educate the children of the furnace's employees. Enlightened self-interest may indeed have prompted the expenditure. Sharpsville at the time was barely a village and a school may have been necessary to attract a sufficient number of workmen. The name Himrod, however, hints a more altruistic motive may have behind the erection of the school. Bethuel B. Vincent and William Himrod were interested in several business ventures in

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A Look Back

John Marston Goodwin

Few who have made Sharpsville their home possessed the distinctive talents and varied experience of John Marston Goodwin. Born at Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1833, he was the namesake of his father who served as Superintendent of Massachusetts General Hospital. Goodwin's maternal grandfather was a Baptist minister with abolitionist sympathies; his step-grandmother ran a school for African-American girls and in a celebrated case challenged the constitutionality of a racist Connecticut statute directed against the school. Despite only a prep school education, Goodwin became an engineer and gained experience and reputation in the construction of various railroads in Canada, New England, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Toledo.

During the Civil War, he worked as an assistant to Peter H. Watson, who himself was a close friend and assistant to Secretary of War Edward Stanton. (Documents he handed down to his son, including a draft in Lincoln's hand, attest to Goodwin's proximity to the deliberations in Washington.) Watson who was known for his zealous prosecution of war profiteers left the War Department in 1863 and went to Mercer, Pa. as general manager of Amasa Stone's Mercer Iron & Coal Co. Watson brought Goodwin with him to serve as the firm's engineer; among his duties was the laying out of the new town of Stoneboro (which was named for Amasa Stone). After a four year stint as an engineer for a Kentucky railroad, Goodwin was hired by Watson as consulting engineer at the Jamestown & Franklin Railroad and the Mahoning Coal Railroad. P.H. Watson then became president of the Erie Railway, and chose Goodwin to be his confidential assistant in the sprawling rail system's New York headquarters. Watson's tenure as head of the Erie was marked most notably by his bringing charges against his predecessor, financier Jay Gould, for misappropriating \$9,000,000 of company funds.

Shortly after Watson left the presidency of the Erie in 1874, Goodwin moved to Sharpsville where he became the Chief Engineer of the little Sharpsville Railroad. As such, he gave voluminous testimony in the 1876 suit of the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad that sought to compel the Sharpsville line to remove its grade crossing. (The E&P, while annoyed by the frequent wrecks where the two rail lines crossed, was even more concerned with the prospect of the Sharpsville R.R. connecting with other roads. The adjoining topography—the Mercer Avenue bridge over “Big Cut” and Riverside Cemetery on one side and the steep bank down to the Shenango on the other—however, would admit no solution other than a grade crossing.)

Goodwin's expertise was shown in his monographs and contributions to trade journals on a broad range of railroad engineering and management matters. But the crowning achievement of a career cut short by death (of “brain fever” at age 58) was his appointment two years prior in 1889 by Governor Beaver of Pennsylvania as one of five members of the Commission to study a proposed Lake Erie and Ohio River Ship Canal. (An earlier connection, the Erie Extension Canal, otherwise known as the Beaver & Erie Canal, was abandoned in 1872.) Pittsburgh interests were keen on the project, but Sharpsville, too, would be a focal point of the canal and realize a great boon.

Goodwin was head of the survey corps, which included seven other members including Henry Phelps of Sharpsville. Except for areas in the Shenango River where they poled their skiff to take soundings, they walked the entire route from Lake Erie to the confluence of the Beaver and Ohio Rivers at Rochester. Despite initial fears that the canal would meet insurmountable obstacles of topography and water supply, the Commission did make their recommendation to the Pennsylvania Legislature that the project was feasible. About 30 miles and 83 locks would be saved, much of it by finding a path at a lower elevation and by cutting a straighter line than the old Erie Extension Canal.

Goodwin was acknowledged as the driving force, both in expertise and enthusiasm, behind the project, “where his marvelous grasp of the situation was often shown in public communications and reports to the Legislature.”

A quarter century after his death, the plan was abandoned and revived three times, yet still under consideration. At the outset the main questions about the canal were feasibility, cost, and who would pay. An engineer like Goodwin could answer the first two. The third was left to politicians and financiers. Of course the canal was never built.

This wasn't Goodwin's first study of canals, however. In 1879, while France was planning their ultimately unsuccessful effort to dig a sea-level canal across Panama, other proposals to link the two oceans were elsewhere considered. A sea-level canal across Nicaragua received serious consideration and, of course, the Panama Canal would later be completed using a system of locks to ply through the more mountainous sections of the isthmus. The renowned American engineer, James Eads, would propose yet another system, a “ship-railroad,” whereby ships would steam into a framework mounted on railroad tracks and then be pulled out of the water all **Cont'd. on page 3**

the while rolling on these enormous railroad cars across the width of Panama. While seemingly outlandish, serious consideration was given to the scheme with Congressional hearings held. In analyses published in *Scientific American* and *The Railroad Gazette* as well as in later Congressional testimony Goodwin endorsed the ship-railway but with the vital caveat that the ship be held in a water-filled caisson rather than a dry cradle, lest the hull bulge or warp. In a long paper delivered the following year to the Engineers' Club of Cleveland, Goodwin, using both engineering and economic arguments and employing an impressive array of statistics, dismantled any notion of the economic feasibility of the French canal project. (Though malaria, above all, would be its eventual undoing.)

Goodwin held a number of patents: a method to increase the efficiency of steam locomotive engines, improvements in electric railway signals and the construction of bridge trusses, a device for laying railroad track, and a method of printing drafting paper. An invention for a towing system on canals by endless cable won high praise, and a railroad dump-car for bulk cargo, went into production and was later made by his son's firm, the Goodwin Car Company of Chicago and New York.

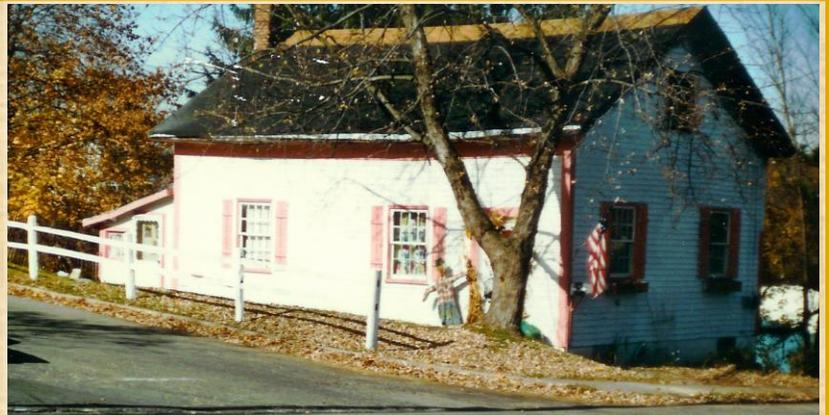
While a member of various professional engineering societies, he also joined The International Institute for Preserving and Perfecting Weights and Measures. Sharpvillians Walter Pierce and James W. Fuller, a watchmaker who later moved to Los Angeles, were also counted as members. The weights and measures the group aimed to preserve and perfect was the quite adequate English system against an impractical (and decidedly French) metric system. Much effort was expended to show the divine inspiration of the inch through a complex series of correspondences to the dimensions of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. (Little, if any, attention was given to the quart and bushel. Also left unclear was why the Lord would ordain the inch through the instrumentality of a Pharaoh a millennium before the Book of Exodus.) The Institute's journal attracted a number of articles dealing with Pyramid lore and the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race as well as more tangential topics such as re-adoption of a silver monetary standard, the Druids, Kabbalistic interpretations of Scripture, whether the British were the lost tribe of Israel, and a four-verse song based on the rhyme "a pint's a pound the world around." By all other accounts Goodwin was a man of science and facts. So his sympathy for these cycles and epicycles of hokum is perhaps hard to explain, unless one considers that members of this group included other engineers, a former governor, industrialists and professors, and the Astronomer Royal of Scotland.

An obituary notes that Goodwin "inherited a careless indifference to the accumulation of property and a strong predilection for philanthropic enterprises, having been, all his life, more concerned about benefitting the community or the company which he was serving than himself. An early acquaintance with Thoreau and with his writings probably contributed something to increase this disinterestedness."

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The Oldest Building in Town, cont'd.

Erie; they also were contracted to build a section of the Erie Extension Canal, which is how they first came to this area. William Himrod was moreover a leading abolitionist in Erie, and established what was called the Himrod Mission Sunday School to provide Bible education for African Americans. (Erie's pastors of the time refused that duty out of bigotry.) Himrod also laid out an area on Erie's west side he called New Jerusalem where newly freed blacks and destitute whites could buy affordable building lots. The same impulse to help his fellow man without regard to station may have prompted Himrod to provide a school for the children of the blast furnace laborers at Sharpville.



The schoolhouse in a 1983 photo

Classes were taught here and at a nearby building until 1869, when General Pierce swapped this structure for a parcel uptown as well as donation of \$2,000 toward a new school building. The new building (upon the site now occupied by the Mertz Tower), constructed of brick, and expanded twice in 1876 and 1883, was later named the Deeter Building.

Afterwards, the original schoolhouse served other purposes: the town hall, a "band room," and until they built their own buildings, the school was the original meeting place for the Methodist and Baptist congregations. More recently, and for some time now, it has been occupied as a rental dwelling. Yet it is deserving of preservation.



The Sharpsville Steel Fabricators (known prior to 1938 as Sharpsville Boiler Works) had a number of product lines throughout its history: boilers, bridges, oil storage tanks, the Sharmeter gasoline dispenser, fire trucks, as well as tanks for fuel trucks. Seen here in front of their plant on Main Street is their tank on the chassis of a ca. 1947 REO Speedwagon for a fuel dealer from Oil City. This is part of a collection of photos of nine such truck tank fabrications.

With a distinctive streamlined grille introduced in 1941, REO trucks were named for their maker, Ransom E. Olds, who also supplied his name to the Oldsmobile. (The REO Speedwagon, in turn, lent its name to the 70s and 80s rock group.)

John Marston Goodwin, cont'd.

Also noted was his skill as a draftsman “with a taste for ornamental letters and borders of his own design, sometimes quaint and humorous, at others beautiful.”

Despite a lack of higher education, the engineer was said to be unusually well informed in general literature and in science. His eulogist also thought Goodwin’s versifying merited the attention of the readers of the “Proceedings of the American Society of Civil Engineers,” and so included some excerpts in his obituary. One short idyll is given here:

NIGHT IN THE FOREST

How still! the great brands fall apart
 With tinkling crepitations;
 I hear the beating of my heart,
 The sleepers’ respirations;
 And sounds mysterious, half defined,
 That come like muffled thunder,
 As if subterrene powers, combined,
 Their bonds had rent asunder

With Gratitude

We recently received donations from:

Ruth Alfredo

Sharpsville High School Class of 1952

Rick Fleischer took the time to give an informative talk on local railroad history at our November meeting.

The **Madrigal Singers of the Shenango Valley Chorale** presented a wonderful Christmas Concert at our building December 20th. In addition to filling all who attended with holiday spirit, their generosity allowed the event to be a financial success for the Society as well.

Contact Us

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Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm